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Playing Soft With the Soviets Will Bring Us Trouble

By George A. Carver Jr.

IN 1961, NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV used a summit to test the mettle of a new president of the United States. A quarter century later, a relatively new ruler of the Soviet Union seems bent on using another summit to prove his own mettle, while testing another American president. Khrushchev's conclusions led him to take the world to the brink of war. If present trends continue, Mikhail Gorbachev's could prove just as dangerous.

An emboldened Soviet Union could challenge the United States and its friends at pressure points around the world, from Berlin to Pakistan to Central America. Those who doubt the Soviets could pose such aggressive threats should remember the jostling that took place 25 years ago.

At the 1961 Vienna summit, Khrushchev was both insulting and patronizing as he alternately ranted and stonewalled. That summit's course, even the fact that it was held, apparently confirmed Khrushchev's assessment that Kennedy had little stomach for confrontation and hence could be bullied and bluffed.

Oversimplifying somewhat, but not much, that assessment led to August 1961's challenges: the construction of the Berlin Wall on the 13th, in direct violation of the 1945 Potsdam agreement, and then at month's end, the Soviet resumption of atmospheric nuclear testing—for which the planning must have been well under way when Khrushchev mendaciously assured Kennedy, at Vienna, that the Soviets would never be the first to resume such tests. The Kennedy administration's purely verbal responses to these provocations further emboldened the Soviets and 14 months later, the Cuban missile crisis was upon us.

In October 1962, the Kennedy administration used the U.S. Navy—backed by additional, visibly assembled forces that the Soviets decided Kennedy might well be willing to employ—to call Khrushchev's hand. Kennedy succeeded. Khrushchev nonetheless got considerable mileage out of the Soviets' classic gambit of easing back from something they should never have done in the first place. In September 1986, Gorbachev is essaying the same gambit with Nicholas Daniloff.

In exchange for withdrawing his missiles from Cuba in 1962, Khrushchev won a permanent mantle of U.S. tolerance, hence protection, for Moscow's Cuban client, Fidel Castro, no matter how much revolutionary mischief Castro undertook in Latin America or elsewhere. With Daniloff, similarly, Gorbachev is trying to get a permanent mantle of American acquiescence and protection for Soviet intelligence activities and operations in the United States, including those conducted out of the United Nations.

In late August 1986, neither superpower anticipated nor, probably, wanted a major confrontation when the FBI arrested KGB staff officer Gennadi Zakharov, whose espionage activities it had long been observing; the Soviets retaliated by seizing in Moscow an innocent American journalist, Nicholas Daniloff. Major confrontations, however, often arise unexpectedly out of incidents, situations or concerns that initially seem of less than historic significance.

The Reagan administration made the fatal mistake of responding to this provocative Soviet challenge with vacillation and rhetoric not backed by action—flagging a weakness that Gorbachev and his Politburo colleagues clearly felt they could exploit by raising the stakes.

The Soviets have a keen sense of historical irony and long memories. Most Americans have neither. In this regard, the Reagan White House is quintessentially American. In October 1963, the FBI arrested three Soviet intelligence officers in New York, one of whom—Igor Ivanov—did not have diplomatic immunity. The next day, the KGB framed and arrested visiting Yale Professor Frederick Barghoorn, on his last night in Moscow. The Soviets then proposed an exchange of Ivanov for Barghoorn, which the Kennedy administration coldly rejected. At a press conference two weeks later, Kennedy publicly demanded Barghoorn's release. Two days later, the professor was freed. In 1963, however, Kennedy made his public demand *after* he had demonstrated that he was prepared to use the U.S. Navy to make the Soviets abandon an unacceptable provocation.

The 1986 situation is quite different, since Reagan has never shown Gorbachev any similar willingness to back up American rhetoric, if necessary, with action. Instead, Reagan sent Gorbachev a letter personally assuring him that Daniloff was innocent. Gorbachev's response was to brand Daniloff publicly as a spy—thus publicly calling Reagan a liar.

This Soviet posture and even this insult are all part of a complex game the Soviets are now playing. Adroitly offering the prospect of an early summit they know the Reagan administration wants for many reasons, including domestic political ones, the Soviets are peddling the line that the Zakharov-Daniloff matter is but a minor obstacle that should not be allowed to impede the pursuit of much more important objectives—such as arms control—and that the U.S. could easily resolve the case “in a minute.” That’s the bait. The hook is that this line carries the clear implication that the U.S. is responsible for the continuation of the Daniloff imbroglio and indeed, by arresting Zakharov, for causing it—a theme some American analysts and commentators, in and out of government, are already beginning to take up.

Much as a pickpocket who distracts a victim’s attention while lifting his wallet, the Soviets want to keep our eyes focused on summit considerations while they settle the Daniloff matter in a precedent-setting way that establishes a principle of equivalence between American journalists’ and Soviet intelligence officers, thus putting a permanent mantle of protection over the latter’s activities in the United States—including Soviet espionage conducted out of the United Nations, and hence partially funded by American taxpayers.

The Soviets would then like to bring us to a summit in the position of a chastened, humiliated supplicant. From any such 1986 summit, no agreements advantageous to the United States would be likely to emerge and indeed, harking back to

1961, even holding such a summit—under those conditions and in that atmosphere—could produce truly disastrous consequences. Were a summit to persuade Gorbachev that Reagan lacked a stomach for confrontation, Gorbachev would have far more resources to employ than Khrushchev ever did; and he would have a far different world in which to employ them.

In October 1962, Kennedy was able to dispatch emissaries to our key allies’ leaders, bearing photographic evidence of what the Soviets were doing in Cuba, and obtain these allies’ instant support. Those allied leaders, however, included Konrad Adenauer in Bonn and Charles de Gaulle in Paris. No leaders of that ilk are to be found today,

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least of all in continental Western Europe. Margaret Thatcher may be as staunch as was Harold Macmillan, if not more so, but should she lose the election which she must call by 1988, a Labor Party would come to power in Britain with a platform and outlook that would have been unthinkable repugnant to any Labor prime minister or cabinet in the 1960s. And so it goes, around the world—where there is a fear of confrontation and hunger for short-run accommodation of an intensity not seen since the 1930s.

In the world of the mid-1980s, a 1961-type summit could easily tempt Gorbachev to probe any of several pressure points around the world in a quest for major, permanent Soviet advantage and a redress of past embarrassments. These pressure points include:

- Berlin, which remains isolated and vulnerable because of its location 110 miles inside East Germany. Understanding Berlin and the equities it involves requires an appreciation of complex symbolism. The American, British and French position is that *all* of Berlin is still under quadripartite allied governance—American, British, French and Soviet. Neither of the two Germanies accepts this position—our West German allies consider “West Berlin” their Federal Republic’s 11th *land*, or state; and the DDR considers “East Berlin” its capital, hence its territory. The Soviets back the East German view, and by repeated slices of symbolic salami, they constantly endeavor to advance it.

Such arcane complexity, however, runs very much against the spirit of the 1980s—which is but one reason why real Soviet pressure on Berlin, backing a sophisticated attempt to change its status permanently, might be very difficult for a Reagan or post-Reagan White House to counter.

- Afghanistan. Whatever the Soviets’ ultimate objectives in Afghanistan may be, their achievement is clearly impeded by Pakistan and, especially, the use of Pakistani territory as a safe-haven refuge for Afghani resisters. For Gorbachev and his Politburo, consequently, Pakistan would be a tempting target for new Soviet adventurism. Any such temptation would be enhanced by the growing criticism of Zia ul-Haq and his government around the

world by those who consider it unacceptably authoritarian. Any master of Zia which gave power in Pakistan to Soviet clients, no matter what slogans or labels they used, would not only seal Afghanistan’s fate, it would alter the balance of power in the Middle East—and perhaps the world.

- The Americas. To a really emboldened Gorbachev, the greatest temptation of all might be to reverse 1962’s verdict by again challenging the United States in its own back yard, this time successfully. While Congress continued to dither about relatively modest levels of support to the contras, for example, the Soviets might drastically raise their levels of involvement in the Western Hemisphere—both through Cuba and directly. This would of course be risky; but in the political climate and environment here postulated, an adventurous Politburo might put that risk at a chilling discount.

In this complex game, we also have some very high cards in our hand.

What the Soviets, including Gorbachev, probably want most is to slow or halt Reagan’s strategic defense initiative. Some American scientists contend that the strategic defense initiative will not work. This is decidedly *not* the Soviets’ view. They are keenly aware of the military potential of the space-related and high-energy research, experimentation and development they have been actively conducting for over 20 years. The Soviets are mortally afraid that if American technology, resources and inventiveness get seriously devoted to SDI, the post-1962 shifts in the “correlation of forces” it has taken them a quarter century to achieve could be altered and reversed within a matter of years. The real reason the Soviets—including Gorbachev—are now advocating a total nuclear test ban, for example, is that some such testing—as they know—is required in our current concept of SDI research and development.

The other major Soviet proposal Gorbachev apparently wants to table, a mutual reduction of medium-range missiles in Europe, has more complex roots. Militarily, the Soviets would like to get our Pershing IIs out of Europe, even at the price of withdrawing mobile SS-20s they can always easily return. Here, however, political objectives are also operative. The So-

viets know well what an added stress it would put on the NATO alliance for the United States to reverse field and withdraw Pershings that other NATO governments, under strong U.S. pressure, recently spent a lot of domestic political capital to accept.

In the current negotiations about a possible Reagan-Gorbachev summit, we need not let ourselves be pressured into abandoning intelligence or any other equities, including Nicholas Daniloff's welfare, and it would be a grievous error to let ourselves be bluffed or bullied into doing so.

We will need steadier nerves than we have recently displayed. American resolve is in the world's interests and even, really, the Soviets'. The right kind of Gorbachev-Reagan summit might well enhance the prospects for a peaceful world. The consequences of the wrong kind of summit could be more hazardous than those of Vienna in 1961.

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